

Chapter 4: Issues and Strategies

White-tailed Deer Habitat

Key to the health of Idaho's white-tailed deer populations is habitat. Humans have a profound influence on deer habitat, but land-use decisions often do not include provisions for maintaining or improving white-tailed deer habitat.

Strategies

- The Department will inventory and produce a GIS map overlay of the state's important white-tailed deer habitat, and distribute this information to the interested public and to appropriate federal, state, and county government offices by June 2006.
- The Department will seek conservation of important white-tailed deer habitat through discussions with landowners, title acquisition, or conservation easement.
- The Department will produce a popular brochure summarizing beneficial plantings and management practices for white-tailed deer habitat by June 2006.
- Interested private landowners and public land managers will be encouraged to consider white-tailed deer habitat guidelines (see Appendix II) in management.



White-tailed Deer Hunting Opportunity

Because white-tailed deer in Idaho occupy relatively dense forested or riparian habitats and harvest mortality rates are relatively low, hunting opportunity is liberal and can occur during the November rut period. In contrast, mule deer in Idaho generally occupy relatively open habitat types and are more vulnerable to harvest mortality, thus hunting opportunity is generally more restrictive and limited primarily to October.

Declines in mule deer populations in southern Idaho led to conservative deer hunting seasons in that part of the state beginning 1993. Declines were not experienced in northern white-tailed deer populations, and long deer hunting seasons were maintained. The disparity in opportunities led to some shift of southern Idaho mule deer hunters to northern Idaho at the conclusion of the southern Idaho deer seasons. Trespass complaints on private property increased to unacceptable levels in portions of northern Idaho. These complaints diminished substantially after 1998, when a zone tag for hunting deer in the Clearwater Region was implemented, and mule deer populations in southern Idaho began increasing from the lows experienced during the early-to-mid 1990s.

When asked in the 2003 Public Opinion Survey (Appendix I), the majority of Idaho hunters indicated it was "important to be able to hunt deer in more than one part of the state in any given year". The Department will balance the desires of hunters and landowners, and recognize the different hunting opportunities available between white-tailed and mule deer, without unduly complicating regulations.

Strategies

- The Department will implement a statewide White-tailed Deer Tag. Deer hunters could choose a statewide Regular Deer Tag, valid for either white-tailed or mule deer, or a White-tailed Deer tag valid only for white-tailed deer. This arrangement provides more flexibility for Idaho hunters and should maintain protection against trespass problems in northern Idaho.
- The Department will pursue standardization of white-tailed deer seasons and tags on a statewide basis." Regular Deer Tag any-weapon seasons will occur primarily during October and should be standardized to the greatest extent possible.

- White-tailed Deer Tag any-weapon seasons will occur during October and November and will be standardized to the greatest extent possible.



Data needs

Meaningful management information pertaining to white-tailed deer is difficult to collect. The secretive nature of white-tailed deer and the habitats they occupy severely limit our ability to estimate population size and composition. Aerial surveys and other traditional approaches such as spotlight surveys and pellet transects provide inaccurate and imprecise indices. Therefore, development of a technique to accurately and precisely estimate population size and composition would permit considerable refinement of whitetail management in Idaho. Harvest data have been difficult to interpret because white-tailed data and mule deer data are combined as “deer” data.

Strategies

- The Department will reassess hunter and landowner satisfaction with the white-tailed deer management program prior to 2010.
- Significantly improve quality and usefulness of white-tailed deer harvest data by establishing a white-tailed deer tag and by modifying the mandatory report system to better evaluate white-tailed deer harvest.
- Design monitoring to help establish the link between harvest data and white-tailed deer populations.
- Adopt a statewide, standard method to index winter severity to help interpret data trends for ungulates by April 2007.

Agricultural and urban deer damage

Department concerns stem from large numbers of white-tailed deer in some areas on predominantly private land. These populations periodically cause large amounts of damage to agricultural crops. The diverse objectives of the many private landowners create a de-facto refuge system in some GMUs, which make many management strategies ineffective. Urban/suburban sites also create refuges that negate many management strategies. Many of these urban/suburban landowners feed and enjoy viewing deer, while others are frustrated with landscaping and garden damage.

Idaho hunters and landowners were asked for input through a random survey as part of the revision of the white-tailed deer plan. Both groups supported various strategies for management but hunters were unwilling to travel in excess of 100 miles to harvest a doe.

Strategies

- The Department will explore additional opportunities to reduce deer numbers through doe harvest in the predominantly private land GMUs. Management tools such as reduced-price tags, multiple tags allowed per person, earlier opening dates, green-field hunt format, etc. will be considered.
- Landowners within white-tailed deer range will be surveyed prior to 2010 to assess satisfaction with the level of damage they sustain. Satisfaction objectives will be established subsequent to the 2010 survey.
- Brochures will be produced and/or purchased by the Department to summarize information on successfully co-existing with white-tailed deer. All County Extension Services and Fish and Game offices will be provided brochures for distribution by July 2005.

Access

Although Idaho's land base is 67% public ownership, private land contributes significantly to the wildlife resources and recreational opportunities of the state. Besides providing important seasonal habitats for numerous big game species, private land provides much of the hunting opportunities for many upland game, waterfowl, and other small game species.

Reduced access to private land or through private land to public land is a growing concern for Idaho sportspersons and the Department. Besides loss of areas for sportspersons to hunt and fish, reduced access to or through private land has led to numerous depredation problems. White-tailed deer can cause significant depredation concerns for agricultural producers and reduced access for hunters exacerbates the problem.

In 2003, the Department implemented the Access Yes! program to address sportsperson's concerns about declining access to private land. Access Yes! financially compensates willing landowners for providing access to or through their property for hunting and fishing. Over 107,000 acres of private land were available to Idaho hunters and anglers the first year. Ultimately the goal is to provide access to 1.2 million acres of private land annually. The Department will focus landowner recruitment efforts in areas where white-tailed deer depredations are a significant concern to agricultural producers and where public land access is restricted by private land.

Strategies

- The Department will encourage access to hunting and fishing opportunities on private land, and encourage access through private to public land.

Availability of mature bucks

Availability of mature bucks is a prominent concern of some white-tailed deer hunters on a nationwide basis. The emergence of Quality Deer Management (QDM) is tied to dissatisfaction with availability of mature bucks in states where buck mortality from hunting is very high, and deer numbers exceed carrying capacity. In order to produce mature bucks without restricting hunter numbers, antler point restrictions have been used, sacrificing buck success rates for availability of adult bucks. High doe harvests are also used in many of these areas to reduce deer densities and improve fitness.

White-tailed deer populations in Idaho exhibit characteristics well beyond goals of QDM managers. Buck survival is high, producing high ratios of mature bucks, and densities are believed to be below carrying capacity, providing good body condition.

As part of this plan revision process, Idaho hunters and landowners were asked for their input regarding a variety of white-tailed deer hunting issues. Results of this White-tailed Deer Management Survey (Appendix I) indicated a strong majority of hunters surveyed were: satisfied with their opportunity to harvest a whitetail buck; satisfied with their opportunity to harvest a mature whitetail buck; and would not support management for more and/or larger whitetail bucks if it meant more restrictions such as shorter seasons, removing the general hunt from the rut, or controlled hunts for bucks.

Strategies

- The Department will ensure hunting seasons do not result in mortality rates that result in low proportions of mature whitetail bucks in the population.



- Statewide, a minimum of 15% of harvested antlered white-tailed deer will have 5 or more antler points on either antler.
- The Northern Forest and Northern Agriculture DAUs will be managed to provide a minimum of 17% of harvested antlered white-tailed deer with 5 or more antler points on either antler.
- The remaining DAUs will be managed to provide a minimum of 10% of harvested antlered white-tailed deer with 5 or more antler points on either antler.
- The Department will explore creating additional hunting opportunities that provide for high success rates, low hunter density, and high percentage of mature white-tailed deer bucks.
- Hunters will be surveyed prior to 2010 to reassess hunter satisfaction with availability of mature bucks for harvest.



Use of motorized vehicles while hunting

Use of off-highway vehicles is popular with many hunters but very unpopular with many other hunters, and is a concern for wildlife managers. Increased motorized access has led to reduced survival of big game (Unsworth et al. 1993) and has resulted in reduced hunting opportunities. Additionally, many hunters believe that encountering motorized vehicles while hunting detracts from their overall experience (Sanyal et al. 1989).

In 2002, the Department first implemented the “Motorized Vehicle Rule” in GMU 47. The rule restricts hunters using motorized vehicles to roads capable of travel by full-sized vehicles. Public support for the rule was high and it was expanded to 26 units in 2004. The Department will evaluate adding additional units where public support exists. Ultimately, the Department will strive for a balance between motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunity while maintaining consideration of biological impacts of motorized recreation.

Strategies

- The Department will support access management on public land providing for a diversity of motorized and non-motorized hunting experiences.
- The Department will continue to work with public land managers and willing private landowners to manage motorized vehicle access at a suitable level for hunters. Concepts of vulnerability (Unsworth et al. 1993), habitat effectiveness (Leege 1984), and hunter behavior and preferences (Sanyal et al. 1989, Gratson and Whitman 2000) will be promoted in land management decisions.
- The Department will conduct a statewide deer hunter survey during 2005 to provide a contemporary assessment of hunter’s preferences for motorized and non-motorized recreational opportunity.

Supplemental feeding of deer

The Department recognizes that white-tailed deer populations should be maintained under natural conditions and by naturally available forage. White-tailed deer populations, harvest and weather will vary from year to year throughout the state. In most years, snow depths, temperatures, and animal body condition do not create adverse conditions for wintering animals.

Feeding during winter concentrates white-tailed deer in unsuitable areas, facilitates spread of disease, and promotes the unrealistic expectation that white-tailed deer populations can be maintained without regard to their habitat.

However, there are times when unusual weather patterns may create critical periods of stress when winter forage becomes limited, unavailable, or animals are forced into areas where public safety becomes an issue. The Department's emergency winter feeding policy provides for circumstances when supplemental feeding of deer is authorized 1) to prevent damage to private property or to protect public safety when other methods are determined to be ineffective, and 2) when excessive mortality would negatively affect recovery of the population.

Deer are frequently fed by the public as recreation, but on occasion in an attempt to bolster local populations. The Department has periodically implemented the emergency winter feeding policy during severe winters. During the past 10 years, the Department spent approximately \$32,000 feeding approximately 3,000 white-tailed deer.

Strategies

- The Department will work with the appropriate land management agencies or landowners in an effort to maintain winter ranges in a condition suitable to meet white-tailed deer management objectives, including the restoration of ranges damaged from past management practices.
- The Department will discourage private feeding of white-tailed deer for recreational purposes.
- Emergency winter-feeding by the Department will be conducted in accordance with established policies and statutes.

Disease

Diseases such as chronic wasting disease (CWD), tuberculosis (TB), and epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD) are prominent on a national scale. Information is lacking, however, on exposure and importance of these and other diseases to white-tailed deer in Idaho. Captive white-tailed deer facilities are uncommon in Idaho, but represent potential sites for disease introductions as well as genetic contamination.

Strategies

- Biological samples will be collected from all white-tailed deer captured by IDFG personnel.
- When feasible, biological samples will be collected from all white-tailed deer that appear ill or have died from disease.
- Brainstems and/or medial retropharyngeal lymph nodes will be collected to help assess exposure to CWD, and to survey for the presence of meningeal worm.
- The Department will continue to prohibit importation of white-tailed deer from outside the state and discourage ownership of captive whitetails within the state.

